OPINION

BY SHAHZAD SHARJEEL

Making martyrs

AS far as the anointed go, saints in the Sufi tradition have it easy. You could be declared one in life and then continue to dispense generosity and blessings from the afterlife. Martyrdom, on the other hand, has a significant drawback: it must be earned with one's life, as the 'immortal' status can only be awarded posthumously, in all traditions. It's strange, then, that martyrdom, a status considered far higher than any other, can be granted to anyone these days.

The right-wing, MAGA influencer Charlie Kirk, who was shot dead at a rally on the University of Utah campus in September this year, is being fashioned as a martyr. The *NYT* recently ran a piece on the required ingredients for a good martyr, especially for conscription into an immediate political purpose. It listed public, dramatic, and innocent deaths, a cause attached to them, and a movement to glorify and capitalise on them, as a must for this recipe.

The word '*shaheed*'(martyr) inspires awe, passion, admiration, and absolute respect. Before any competing words, tropes, and honorifics are introduced, consider the context of this piece: the transcendence of this Arabic word into not just the vocabulary of non-Arabic speakers but also into their body politic, narratives, identities and collective conscience. As long as it was attached to an Abu this and a Bin that, it could be hung on the obsession of 'Islamist fundamentalists' with the promised afterlife, as opposed to the 'rationalist fascists'' rejection of anything beyond the material world. The lines seem to be blurring now.

Street-corner banners could be seen in Surrey, British Columbia, proclaiming 'Shaheed Jathedar Hardeep Singh Nijjar'. Singh was a Sikh separatist shot dead in Canada in front of the Guru Nanak Gurdwara in June 2023. The Indian government claimed that lax policing and appeasement of domestic votes had made Canada a safe space for 'jihadists'. Some may see it as cultural appropriation, and others as their handlers' stamp on Sikh separatist movements for invoking *shahadat*. It's important to remember, however, that in Sikh history, the fifth Guru, Arjun, is considered the first *shaheed*. He was tortured to death during the Mughal emperor Jehangir's reign for refusing to renounce his faith.

The origin of the word '*shaheed*' comes from '*shahadat*', which means to bear witness. In the context of martyrdom, it is closely tied to monotheistic faith and, by extension, the concept of the afterlife. Sacrificing one's life to fulfil duties stemming from the verbal *shahadat* grants the individual the status of *Shaheed* — the highest a believer can aim for — promising eternal life and companionship of the holiest on the Day of Judgement. While this idea has inspired some who believe they are fighting for a just cause to face unimaginable challenges, its misuse has also led to the rise of suicide bombers.

Invoking martyrdom turns victims into heroes whose reward is hoped to be in the afterlife, making current calls for justice seem petty. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's execution in 1979, although widely regarded as a judicial murder, has not been overturned by a court of law. In the court of public opinion, at least among his supporters, he has long been considered a *shaheed*. A university established to honour his legacy includes the suffix '*Shaheed*' in its name, as does a political party founded by his son after he broke ties with his sister, Benazir. Yet, his most notable creation, the Pakistan Peoples Party, recently sought to have a resolution passed by the National Assembly declaring ZAB a 'national martyr'. Strangely, his nemesis and tormentor, Ziaul Haq, the military dictator under whom Bhutto was executed, is also portrayed as a *shaheed*. The MQM has designated a graveyard in Karachi as Shuhuda Qabristan (martyrs' cemetery), where party workers and leaders, particularly those who suffered violence, are buried.

> It's strange that martyrdom can be granted to anyone these days.

As we consider the idea of supreme sacrifice and eternal redemption in the afterlife, it's natural to think about the exemption from prosecution in this life that beneficiaries of immunity might enjoy. While our parliament has currently limited such exemptions to a few individuals, the Israeli Knesset, in March 2023, debated a bill from far-right factions calling for immunity from prosecution for all soldiers. The reason behind this proposed exemption is that all soldiers risk their lives, and the fear of legal action and consequences might prevent them from performing their duties without fear. The bill was put on hold. Opponents of the proposal, including the attorney general, pointed out that such legislation could leave exempted individuals vulnerable to international prosecution, including at the International Court of Justice. ■

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BY MAHIR ALI

BBC vs King Con

NEITHER Donald Trump nor any of his associates expressed any righteous indignation over an episode of BBC TV's *Panorama* when it was broadcast more than a year ago. After all, it wasn't aired in the US.

Now that it has been brought to his attention, the American president has threatened to sue Britain's public broadcaster for $1bn (perhaps even $5bn) for its editorial audacity in stitching together two tiny segments of his warm-up speech to the mob that stormed the Capitol on Jan 6, 2021. The words "We're going to walk down to the Capitol" were separated by more than 50 minutes from the advice: "And we fight. We fight like hell." By splicing together the 12-second segment, the BBC show is accused of suggesting that Trump explicitly invited the violence that followed.

Frankly, no one who listened to the entire speech or observed Trump's subsequent actions could have come to a different conclusion. Shortly afterwards, the House of Representatives impeached him for a second time on that very basis. The BBC's editing could have been more judicious, but it hardly qualifies as a billion-dollar error — or a substantial reason for heads to roll.

Hitherto, Trump has only tried suing US media entities (as part of a broad vendetta that stretches from individuals to universities), for facetious reasons, and corporations such as Paramount and Disney have caved in by donating millions to the future presidential library foundation. Reparations have also been extracted from Meta and YouTube. His $15bn suit against *The New York Times* for critical coverage has gone nowhere, much like his bid to sue *The Wall Street Journal* for revealing Trump's salacious 50th birthday message to the paedophile and human trafficker Jeffrey Epstein.

Any defamation case against the BBC filed in Florida (as Trump has indicated) is unlikely to bear fruit, given everything he has said about the events of Jan 6. Trump himself, mind you, is a media owner whose personal Truth Social feed is a relentless stream of pernicious blather (some of it potentially defamatory) alternating with self-aggrandising re-posts.

At the same time, it's hard to empathise with the BBC, whose claims to independence and impartiality have often been suspect. The silly argument that the broadcaster must be doing something right if it regularly comes under attack from both the left and the far right continues to be occasionally regurgitated. But it can be said that since its inception more than 100 years ago, it has often been seen to be aligned with the British establishment.

Sure, it has every now and then incurred government wrath and faced takeover threats. Such instances mostly flowed from disputes within the ruling elite, rather than reflecting a nod towards popular discontent. For instance, robust reporting on the 'dodgy dossier' used to justify Britain's participation in the 2003 military assault on Iraq followed secret briefings that indicated scepticism among the intelligence agencies about Baghdad posing an imminent threat. The Suez and Falklands wars also stirred a degree of BBC dissent (and a predictable backlash) for similar reasons.

The BBC's global recognition testifies to its diminishing but still significant role as a conduit for Britain's soft power. But no one can seriously deny that it has, over the decades, served as a home for many worthy journalists, and still does. Domestically, news operations are only one part of the media behemoth, and it has so far survived the challenges posed by new technologies and changing patterns of news consumption — plus a series of sex and paedophilia scandals.

> The broadcaster is defensible, unlike Trump.

Its biggest current challenge comes from culture warriors such as board member Robbie Gibbs — a "proper Thatcherite conservative" (by his own description), former Tory spin doctor and linked to GB News, who in 2020 rescued the *Jewish Chronicle* with undeclared resources — and others who wish to turn it another far-right outfit, or destroy it.

Political appointments to its executive cadre are the bane of the BBC, and its licence fee and charter. Among its various other missteps and follies, it has failed to adequately push back against charges of being unfair towards Israel, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary in the face of a genocide that echoes its hostility towards anti-fascist opinions in the run-up to World War II. Its pointless efforts to strike a 'balance' are reflected in the airtime offered to Nigel Farage and climate change denialists. Beyond its multifarious inadequacies in the news and current affairs sphere, there is much to cherish among its cultural output.

It remains to be seen whether the BBC can be rehabilitated as a relatively reliable source of news and views, but at least that is a possibility, however remote. Who could honestly make the same claim about King Con's White House enterprise? ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Constitution's structure

RAWALPINDI: Federal Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Malik Meraj Khalid, today [Nov 18] said that fundamental structure of the permanent Constitution after the adoption of the Fourth Constitutional Amendment Bill remained unchanged. Addressing a Press conference … he said amendments made in the Constitution were urgent, unavoidable and of national importance and mainly sought to clarify wherever there is room for doubt. In no case they impinge on the rights of the courts or curtail the fundamental rights of the citizens, he said.

The … Minister, refuting Opposition's claims, reiterated that the Constitution still ensured Fundamental Rights, independence and supremacy of the judiciary and its Federal and Parliamentary nature was intact. Malik Meraj said the Opposition members in the National Assembly were consulted before the introduction of the Bill and every effort was made to accommodate their point of view. But … they selected a wrong path and tried to misguide the common man about the amendments. The Minister took up each Article which has been amended and explained at length the nature of amendments. — News agencies

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Nepal rebellion

KHATMANDU: A Government spokesman said on Saturday [Nov 18] that State troops have captured Birganj and quelled the invasion by Nepali Congress forces who sought to overthrow the regime. … Birganj, on the frontier of Bharat and Nepal, fell on Friday [Nov 17] ending Government's campaign against Congress troops who struck into Nepal from Bharat last week. Congress troops were fighting to depose Nepal's hereditary feudal Prime Minister Maharajah Chandra Rana's Government. …

… Nepalese Premier said in a telegram on Friday that the invasion by Nepali Congress forces to depose him has failed. … The Rana said in a message to his brother-in-law that the week-long "invasion" had fizzled out and quiet had returned to Nepal. The telegram was dispatched as Nepali state forces were reported to have clashed with invading Congress troops near Birganj … .

[Meanwhile, as per reports from Karachi,] Pakistan will not support Tibet before the United Nations in her complaint of aggression against the Peoples Republic of China, competent sources said in Karachi… . … Pakistan would observe an attitude of neutrality when the complaint comes up for discussion… .

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Idea of nation-state is on death throes

THE modern world rests on an idea of sovereign nation-states that was forged nearly four centuries ago. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, this model has defined international relations. But in the 21st century, that foundation seems to be developing some cracks. Across continents, states appear to be struggling to perform the most basic of their duties — ensuring safety, economic stability, and fair political representation. From fragile regions in Africa and Asia to the highly developed West, the system that was once designed to guarantee order is now showing signs of fatigue.

This unravelling of the system did not happen overnight. It is the slow erosion of institutions — the kind of decay that begins in corruption and ends in utter collapse. The very architecture of the global order seems to be weakening, as governments fail or struggle to deliver justice or protect their people from the pressures of poverty, inequality and global disruption.

When a state truly begins to fail, the symptoms are quite unmistakable. The government loses control of its territory, the courts are rendered powerless, taxes go uncollected, laws become negotiable, and armed groups rise to fill the vacuum. Basic services, like healthcare and education, survive only through informal systems or foreign aid. The entire social contract between the people and their government stops existing.

At the heart of this crisis lies a collapse of political legitimacy. When citizens no longer believe in the fairness or purpose of their government, the state begins to rot from within. The elite class, instead of governing, exploits public institutions for personal gains. Corruption becomes the rule, not the exception. And, as the distance between the rulers and the ruled widens, trust evaporates. Without the required legitimacy, even the most powerful government becomes brittle. Climate change acts as a silent aggressor, especially in countries reliant on fragile agricultural systems. Droughts, floods and rising temperatures destroy livelihoods, displace millions, and spark resource conflicts. These are not isolated environmental issues — they are political ones. Every crop that fails pushes a nation closer to instability.

Across the developing world, millions are turning away from politics entirely, convinced that the system is beyond repair. Global forces make the internal decay even deadlier. Globalisation, once seen as a path to prosperity, has weakened the state's control over its own destiny. Capital, data and technology flow freely across borders, while national laws struggle to catch up. Multinational corporations, tech giants and financial markets often wield more influence than elected governments. Sovereignty, once absolute, is now porous.

What the world is witnessing today, however, is not the death of the state, but its transformation. Power is shifting — from governments to global networks, and from territorial control to economic and digital influence. The question is whether this transformation will lead to a more equitable world or a more fractured one. And, this is a critical question that is bound to gain significance with every passing day.

The way forward demands a rethinking of the concept of governance itself. Military interventions and foreign aid cannot rebuild what corruption has already hollowed out. Nations must reconstruct legitimacy from within — through transparency, accountability and inclusion. Education, civic participation and equitable opportunity are not abstract ideals; they are the foundations of political survival.

For the global community at large, the lesson is quite loud and clear: instability anywhere can quickly become instability everywhere. If the existing international system cannot find a way to manage shared threats, it seriously risks collapsing under its own contradictions. The 21st century's greatest challenge is not about conquering new territories or building stronger armies, but about rebuilding trust.

Airaaf Ali
Sukkur

Gaza mission

THIS is with reference to the editorial 'Gaza mission' (Nov 14), which rightly pointed out the general deficiencies and pitfalls in operationalising the Gaza plan tabled by United States President Donald Trump. I particularly support the advice that, all things considered, it would be, in fact, "better to stay away from such a scheme".

I would go a step further and advise the relevant authorities not to commit troops for the proposed Gaza Stabilisation Force. We are facing a multiple-front scenario at home. With a jingoistic neighbour to the east, unstable Afghanistan playing dangerous game of supporting the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the consequent revival of terrorism within our borders, we need each and every soldier at home.

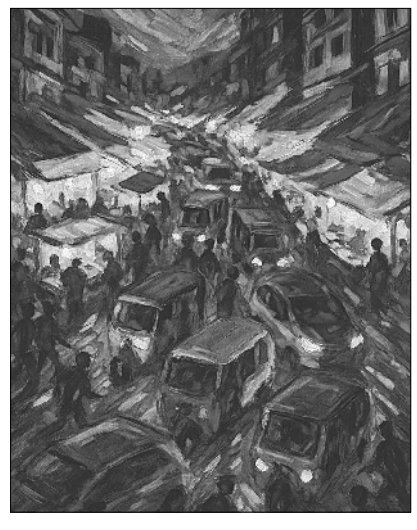
Arab countries have raised a number of questions about Gaza plan and its implementation. The Palestinian right to statehood must be reiterated, otherwise the wounds will not heal. Moreover, any force sent there must be under the umbrella of the United Nations that would give it a trait of neutrality.

Pakistan's long-standing policy on all matters related to the Middle East has been to support Arab consensus, and to stay away from all inter-Arab rifts. That policy should be maintained unchanged as the policy does make a lot of sense. As things stand, public opinion within Gaza is quite divided on Hamas and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), and we should keep away from contentious issues.

Besides, Hamas still enjoys support in some sections of our own society for having bravely stood up to Israel. A major function of the international force will be to disarm Hamas, and that could be very problematic. We should continue our well-known and effective policy of supporting Palestinian rights at all forums.

Former ambassador Javed Hafiz
Islamabad

Roadside chaos



THIS is with reference to the report 'No chairs, tables of eateries on walkways along major roads' (Nov 15). The decision by the government is highly welcomed because such illegalities, along with the presence of roadside vendors, are the main reasons behind road congestion, environmental pollution and serious civic discomfort.

Many people argue that encroachments would not have been possible without the 'assistance' provided by law-enforcement agencies (LEAs), especially the traffic police. And there is much weight in the argument. What remains to be seen now is implementation, otherwise this standard operating procedure (SOP) would soon add to the heaps of similar laws that have never been enforced with any degree of consistency.

A large metropolitan city like Karachi needs a huge infrastructure to enforce such actions. If the city commissioner also starts a portal, for example a WhatsApp number or something similar, for citizens to report any violations with pictorial evidence, it may help the LEAs in tracking violations. Moreover, the city authorities may kindly clarify how the illegal 'assistance' of the LEAs be stopped to ensure that the step sees the light of the day.

Dr Sohail Akhtar
Karachi

School clash

THE number of out-of-school children in rural Sindh, according to the Bureau of Statistics, is 5.12 million. This huge swathe of children opts out of school chiefly due to poverty and its associated problems. With tribal conflict having spread to even schools, the number of out-of-school children is expected to rise. The parents who believe in educating their children would prefer keeping them at home, for they would prefer their children to be alive even if uneducated.

About a couple of months ago, a clash between Mahar and Jatoi tribes clash at a school Burri Sethar village of Shikarpur district left three men dead. A 12-year-old boy studying in grade VI was left injured. It is shocking that the law-and-order situation has weakened to such an extent that the violent brutes stormed into the government school with brazen audacity. Their impunity is fuelled by the recurrent failure of local police to contain crime and maintain order. The role of police, it seems, has been confined to merely 'investigating' incidents after the dust has settled.

Schools are places for children to learn, not to experience violence. They deserve books, pencils and discourses, not bloodshed, gunshots and savagery.

Probe into such devastating cases alone is not enough. Strict action must be taken against the perpetrators to prevent such occurrences. If this incident is forgotten, it will grant criminals across the board a licence to perpetuate further bloodshed and to continue to mock the law of the land.

Hamza Waseem Mustafa
Shikarpur

▶ **GROWING EXTREMISM:** The recent rise in militant attacks and intolerance has caused fear and insecurity among Pakistanis. Many innocent lives have been lost. Such violent incidents destroy our peace, unity and the very foundations of the nation. The reasons behind this growing extremism are lack of education, unemployment and the misuse of religion by certain groups. It is the responsibility of the government and people alike to stand united against such acts and groups. We need to promote tolerance and educate our youth about peace and coexistence. Only through unity, education and justice can we overcome this serious threat, and ensure a brighter and safer future for Pakistan.
Kaleemullah
Karachi

▶ **BRAND OBSESSION:** Today, the value of a product depends more on its label than on the actual quality. This growing obsession with branded goods has deeply affected our youth. People are spending beyond their means to maintain a certain image. This has resulted in increasing materialism, social comparison, and emotional dissatisfaction. Such attitudes also widen the social gap, creating an environment where people are judged not by their character or intellect, but by the brands they display. Educational institutions, media and parents must collectively work to reshape these misplaced priorities, and help young people understand clearly that personal worth does not come with a price tag.
Farhan Khan
Karachi

▶ **CHOKED GUTTERS:** The insanitary conditions in most areas of Rawalpindi have become a nuisance for the people, and a source of widespread diseases. Piles of garbage are present at various places. Sewerage lines are broken, gutters are choked, and sewage water stands at many spots. These insanitary conditions are affecting people's health. The standing water has become breeding grounds for mosquitoes. The authorities concerned should do the needful without any delay.
Shahwaiz Bhatti
Rawalpindi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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